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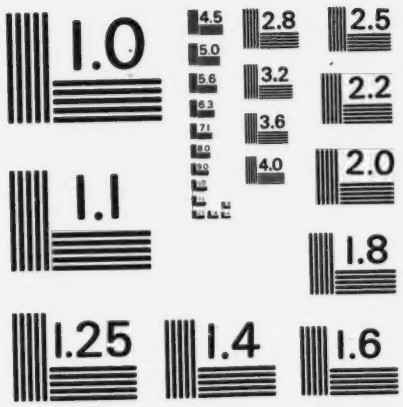

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ABSTRACT

The teacher of English prose is responsible for teaching students three skills: the ability to react with appropriate sensibility to prose literature, the ability to understand written prose, and the ability to write prose that can be understood. A study of the precision and demands of the best modern novelists (Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf, Faulkner, and Hemingway) can broaden the literary response of students overexposed to the classical styles of the early 17th and 18th centuries (Browne and Johnson) or to the romantic styles that appeared in the later 18th and 19th centuries. Comparing the purpose, form, and communication success of the simple language of Robert Boyle and the Royal Society to the prose of later scientists, sociologists, and critics can illustrate the ways that style may interfere with the conveyance of ideas. In teaching writing, the heavily Latinate context of most modern grammars needs to be opposed in favor of clarity, good construction, and effective communication of the author's ideas. (LH)

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Opinion

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The Teaching of Modern English Prose

By Professor Ian A. Gordon

(A paper read before the South Australian English Teachers' Association, Adelaide, 2nd June, 1967.)

In preparing this paper, 1 have proceeded on one major assumption, that all of us, or nearly all of us, in this room today are teachers of English. Of course we are all, in our own minds at least, a great deal more than that. I can take it that we are united in enjoying English literature. Otherwise why should we be in the job at all? Some of us have pretentions to be scholars. Some of us have pretentions to be critics. Some of us have even greater pretention to claim to be both. Some of us will even claim to be specialists, cultivating our little half acre, which can be variously entitled "English poetry between 1758 and 1763" or "English curriculum formation for the slower moving pupil" or "After Transformational Grammar, What?" or "Principles of timetable construction for English classes in a large co-educational multi-stream secondary school". Some of us may even be writers — I use the term in its best sense, people who are in fact writing literature and not writing about it. Some of us may make no claim more pretentious than that we like to curl up with a good book. With some or, indeed, any of these attributes, plus a bit of know-how in the classroom, we are in business as teachers of English. I speak today not as a scholar to scholars, not as a critic to critics, not as a specialist to specialists, but as a teacher to teachers.

We are all teachers; agreed. We are all teachers of English; agreed. We seem to be an agreeable lot. In fact, we are often far from that. In this agreeable subject, English, there is a surprising lack of agreement about what we are really trying to do. How many young teachers of English, faced with a restive class and a weekly batch of corrections, have uttered the despairing cry: What is it I am supposed to teach? What is "English"?

Before I can make a beginning on the main topic of today's discussion, English Prose since 1920, I must recall my major assumption — I am considering modern prose, but in a specific context, the context of the teaching of English.

What after all is English? In case you do not recognize that simple question as a quotation, it comes from a book published in 1947 with the unimaginative title **The Teaching of English.** The author stands before you. In that slim volume, I spent two full pages giving the answers that other people had given and then ventured on an answer of my own. A few years ago, I picked up the latest 200 pages on how to teach English, issued for the British Ministry of Education by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, and since (like all good scholars) I like to keep abreast with what are called the frontiers of knowledge, I turned to page 48, because it began with the momentous question: What is English? My heart leapt up. Here I was on the frontier, ready for illumination. But alas for human hopes! Page 48 read as follows:

"What is English?" asks Professor I. A. Gordon in his book **The Teaching of English.** His answer, but for a fragment of New Zealand vernacular, might have been given in London, Glasgow or Manchester as fairly as in Wellington and then I found myself faced with a page and a half of my original two pages quoted verbatim, until the Ministry of Education (pos-

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sibly somewhat concerned now by the operation of the Copyright Act) hastened to sum it all up neatly by saying that Professor Gordon's answer is "the same as that given in the present chapter".

To find that Father Christmas is in reality your own father is devastating. But to find that Father Christmas is yourself is utterly demoralizing.

Since my little book has exhausted two editions and is unavailable until the author gets round to a revision — and perhaps this conference will provide him with the stimulus — let me be permitted to quote my younger self:

"What after all is 'English'? As a result of its varied origins it has been many things in the past. English has been figures of speech and parsing and general analysis, the correction of sentences and rules for the use of 'which' or 'that'. English has been the qualities of prose style (classified like the gears of a car into high, middle, low, and neutral; or elevated, plain, and the rest). English has been the periods of literature, the kinds of literature, gush about Shelley and chit-chat about Charles Lamb, the enjoyment of literature and be-hanged to the external examination. English has been Grimm's Law, Indo-European roots, and the three periods of Latin influence. English has been the development of self-expression and the disciplining of sensibility. English has been clear thinking and logic for the young citizen. English has been the **Conciliation with America** with the docile first year and **Hydriotaphia** with the restive third. English, cries one group, should contain a solid grammatical preparation for the learning of Latin. English, cries another, should be the core subject. English, cry yet other voices, should never have been allowed into the syllabus; English is what my typists should have learned at school; English merely prepares the proletariat to understand the words of command. English laments many a floundering novice teacher, is the most difficult subject of all to teach. English?, responds a treble voice, I speak English, don't I? My cobbers understand me. Why the heck should you have to teach me English at all?

In all this babel what is English? I am convinced that once we realize what English is about, what we are teaching English for, much of the current discussion on the content of syllabuses, on methods of presentation, teaching techniques and the like, falls for ever into a subordinate position. Once we realize clearly our aims, our means may be left largely to look after themselves.

English is a threefold skill, the ability to express oneself in spoken or written speech and so to initiate communication; the ability to understand the spoken or written speech of another and so to complete the communication; and the ability to feel or appreciate the appeal of literature. From one point of view the third is merely an extension of the second at a different level. (Ideally there should be a fourth, the ability to communicate at this higher level — the writing of literature itself — but this is probably an unusual activity for the schoolroom. It has yet to be proved that writing at this level can be taught, and it has seldom been written by children.) The first two are largely (but not entirely) intellectual skills; the third is largely (but not entirely) an emotional response. In actual practice they may often enough go hand in hand. But the training of the intellect and the development of sensibility though complementary should be differentiated in the mind of the skilled teacher of English. A pupil can be intellectually capable of grasping (with dictionary or other aid) the words of a passage of prose or of poetry but emotionally too immature to understand fully what they are attempting to express. The first two skills are, by

direct instruction, by example, by drill, by exercise, within the intellectual limits of the pupil, teachable. The third can be aroused only by personal contact and the communication of enthusiasm."

Do I still believe this? I think I do. In any case, my definition of English as a threefold skill will do as a working hypothesis for the examination of what we as teachers are to do about modern prose. The three-fold skill: let me rewrite them in simpler terms: the ability to express oneself in written or spoken speech; the ability to understand the spoken or written speech of another; the ability to feel or appreciate the appeal of literature. In the context of today's topic, we can narrow this down even further. Important though it is, I take it we are not today concerned with pupils' speech. In any case, I think that poetry and drama — particularly drama — is the better material for that. We can eliminate then the spoken element, further we can eliminate all but prose expression, and rewrite our three skills even more simply: the ability to write prose that can be understood; the ability to understand written prose; the ability to react with appropriate sensibility to prose literature. It's getting pretty simple, isn't it? Dangerously so, unless you hold in mind the qualifications in my longer statement. But with all the dangers of over-simplification, I am prepared to advocate it as a basis for a whole approach to the teaching of modern prose.

There is a further danger against which I must warn you. You cannot take English prose since 1920 as something that has happened in an isolated chunk of time, nor as a series of texts which can be studied in isolation without reference to their intention, their genre, their placing in their own tradition. You cannot begin to understand Joyce's **Ulysses** unless you take into account Lawrence Sterne; and unless you knew a great deal of the history of English prose from Anglo-Saxon onwards, the subtleties of Joyce's great chapter in the maternity hospital make no impact. I do not wish to be misunderstood. I am not suggesting that the pupil in school faced with a modern prose text must in addition carry the burden of the long history that lies behind it. But the teacher must.

Prose is a different kind of medium from poetry. Poets (in T. E. Eliot's phrase) "purify the dialect of the tribe". But the user of prose essentially just writes down the dialect. Some of these users may elevate their writing to achieve an approved literary status, but they can never get too far away from the accepted dialect of the tribe. Prose, unlike poetry, is demotic. It is something we all use. Any move too far away from current speech, and prose topples over the edge into preciousness, exoticism, even incomprehensibility. The old-style anthology of "purple patches" — and there are still too many of them around — is no more than a collection of deviants from a norm. It is my firm belief that we can teach English prose only if we recognize what is the norm. Recognizing that, we can then assess the value of the deviants.

Last year I published a book entitled **The Movement of English Prose.** I suspect that is the reason for your handsome gesture in asking me to come to Adelaide. Since what I wrote there has relevance to today's topic, let me briefly recapitulate my findings; I offer them unashamedly in potted form, without qualifications and without evidence, simply as a series of assertions. English prose throughout the earliest centuries, the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English periods, was a prose of utility, closely echoing the movement and structures of spoken speech. The prose that now almost exclusively occupies the attention of the literary critic and the literary

historian did not even begin till the late sixteenth century, when English gave itself over to classical and humanistic Latin. The impact of Latin rhetoric, Latin vocabulary, even Latin sentence-structure, is everywhere apparent in the magnificent prose of the seventeenth century. The magnificence did not last. The older prose of utility was reinstated in the 1660's in what Bishop Sprat, the historian of the Royal Society, called "a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses, a native easiness". This new-old prose now stemmed from the easy informal speech of the upper reaches of English society, and it became the basis for all prose writing, whether scientific, philosophical or literary, in our greatest century of prose, the years between 1660 and 1760.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, for reasons I wish I had more time to discuss, the honeymoon was over . . . I could cite responsible and intelligent critics of the time assuring us that the prose of Addison and of Swift was ungraceful and even "negligent". Their kind of clear, easy, speech-based prose did not, of course, disappear. But it was overshadowed in fashion by two new ways of writing prose. First, there was a return to Latin vocabulary and the Latin rhetoric that derived from Quintilian. This kind of elevated, neo-classical prose — Dr. Johnson is the greatest exponent — set a deliberate distance between writer and reader. It was, and in its surviving forms still is, a prose of public statement, a prose which announces the seriousness of the topic under discussion.

The second innovation was the creation of what I am going to call romantic prose. I use the term in a functional and not a chronological sense. We are so used to this kind of prose (though not under this title) that it comes as something of a shock to see how recently it has evolved. It is prose directed towards manipulating the feelings of the reader. It uses an array of evocative imagery, new syntactic devices, constant metaphoric heightening, to excite an affective response. In the many centuries before 1760, it is extremely difficult to find samples of this kind of prose. In the two centuries since 1760 it is difficult to find anything else. It is prose which has invaded an area previously reserved for poetry.

Our own country has inherited these three registers, these three ways of writing prose. Let me begin with the last one. I am prepared to claim that the best prose written in our century was written by a group of English novelists in the 1920's. Head and shoulders above them all towers James Joyce, a lord of language. Contributing to the move were Lawrence and Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, and a little later in America, Hemingway and Faulkner. These men and women did not merely reshape the novel. They reshaped English prose. They took the romantic evocative prose of the nineteenth century and gave it precision and a new kind of responsibility. They knew too what the nineteenth century generally did not know, what Sterne had been and Jane Austen had hinted at, that the syntax of speech can be replaced with a new kind of written syntax, the syntax of thought. Let me cite a couple of examples, one simple, one not-so-simple. In **The Daughters of the Late Colonel,** Katherine Mansfield has a pair of elderly sisters, grieving at table. They ring for the maid:

> And proud young Kate, the enchanted princess, came in to see what the old tabbies wanted now.

Here in this quite normally structured sentence, we are skilfully manipulated by the author, who shifts us from the point of view of the two sisters, awed and obscurely envious of the girl's dazzling youth, to the viewpoint of the maid, haughtily resentful of her elderly mistresses having once again

rung the bell. No word has been actually said. No conversation is reported. We are listening to the syntax of unspoken thought. And note that, like most explicators, I have taken over sixty lame words to express what Katherine Mansfield did, with economy and precision, in seventeen. It is in page after page of prose of such technical virtuosity that the novelists of the twenties demonstrate the enormous advance that they made on all their predecessors.

Here is a more complex example, with quite differently structured syntax:

> Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing
> Imperthnthn thnthnthn.
> Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.
> Horrid! And gold flushed more.
> Ahusky fifenote blew.
> Blew. Blue bloom is on the
> Gold pinnacled hair.
> A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of Castille.
> Trilling, trilling: Idolores.
> Peep! Who's in the . . . peepofgold?
> Tink cried to bronze in pity.
> And a call, pure, long and throbbing. Longindying call.
> Decoy. Soft word. But look! The bright stars fade. O rose!
> Notes chirruping answer. Castile. The morn is breaking.
> Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.
> Coin rang. Clock clacked.
> Avowal. Sonnez. I could. Rebound of garter. Not leave thee.
> Smack. Le cloche! Thigh smack. Avowal. Warm. Sweetheart, goodbye!
> Jingle. Bloo.
> Boomed crashing chords. When love absorbs. War! War!
> The tympanum.

What is all this? An Imagist poem? It could be, I suppose. In fact, as I am sure you all know, it is the opening of the chapter in **Ulysses**, set in the Ormond Bar. In this fragmented syntax, with image set against image, Joyce is stating in prelude form the themes of the ensuing chapter. When this opening section is read a second time, after we have completed the chapter, we see that everything is there. We have been flitting from mind to mind, from the two barmaids, to old Daedalus and his song, to saddened and cuckolded Bloom, to Blazes Boylan and his afternoon affair with Molly. Even the street outside, the vice-regal procession and the brass band can all be seen and heard.

This is the prose of a modern master. What looks on first glance mere typographical chaos has in fact been put together with craftsmanlike care. It is enormously complex, but every detail of the baroquelike splendour fits into place. Magnificent. Yet the word is a bit ominous. You will remember we had magnificence before in the seventeenth century. It did not last. It is possible that the best novelists of the twenties have done to English prose what Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne did to it in the seventeenth, made it too large for life? Are we in for another revolution such as the scientists of the Royal Society initiated in the 1660's?

Before I attempt to answer that one, let me remind myself once again we are here as teachers. Can we teach what I am claiming as the best of the modern novel? Remember my definition of the threefold skill particu-

larly the third: the ability to react with appropriate sensibility to prose literature. Can we use these novelists of the twenties in the classrooms? I cannot give you an unequivocal yes to that question. I know nothing of the Australian curricula but as an examiner of New Zealand schools — where teachers have a free choice in what books they decide to read for public examinations — I assure you that if I set an open question on the novel, to be answered from the candidate's (or his teacher's) choice of text, five authors will turn up again and again: Dickens and Jane Austen; then Graham Greene, George Orwell, and William Golding. In other words we seem to think that we can ask our children to study the great (and, incidentally, readable) masters of the nineteenth century; but from our own time, we play safe by setting before the children some reputable runners from the second string. Is this cowardice? It could be. As readers and critics we must see that new ways of writing get a fair and sympathetic hearing from audiences that are often lazy or reluctant. The typical New Zealand list of novels probably represents a realistic acceptance that in training literary sensibility we cannot go too far too fast. Yet I would hope that at least in the final year of school the better pupils get the chance of having their minds really stretched, even if the limit for the average reader of modern novels still remains at Big Brother and the whisky priest. The very best of modern prose is difficult, subtle, and demanding. It is worth our while seeing if the demand can find a response.

I shall now turn to the second of my three-fold skills, the ability to understand written prose. I am being caught a little here by my own earlier simplifications. When I say in this context "written prose", I hope you will take me to mean "written prose other than the novel". Or, if you think it is not too question-begging, "non-literary prose". We really are short of a descriptive term here. I am almost tempted to put forward a new term. Let's call it for the moment **prose**-prose: prose written for exposition, for neutral narrative, for discussion, for description, for handling ideas. In terms of sheer consumer demand, there is much more need for this kind of prose than for the prose of literature. The literate, educated man, unless he has a most unusual job like that of a publisher's reader, reads his literary prose in the evening. He spends his days with **prose**-prose. Even a Professor of English, I suspect, reads in the course of a normal working day more pages of committee reports than of John Donne's Sermons.

How have we been served since 1920 by writers of this kind of prose? Here the contrast between the best of the novelists (sensitively controlling their images, constructing — with craftsmanlike skill — sentences, paragraphs, major units into a satisfying whole) and the mass of economists, scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, educationalists — even I regret to admit historians and literary criticis — is so great as to suggest that something very serious has gone wrong with modern prose.

Let us listen to a few passages:

A SOCIOLOGIST:

> In the act of forging an ephemeral reorganization occurs in response to situational interactors which may be recognized as a special symbolic process conceived to cover aspects of motivation, feeling, emotion and the choices of adjustment alternatives. The personal differentials we have set down here are the original broad limits within which a certain class of situations can impinge upon the person with the possibility of emergent forgery.

A LITERARY CRITIC:

> The peculiarly literary value of literary works, however, is a function not of their presuppositions or of their materials of ideas and images as such but of these as formed into fully realized and beautiful individual wholes. We can indeed say of such wholes that they give us a kind of pleasure that is hard to distinguish from the pleasure of "cogency" we experience in reading successfully a philosophic argument; in both cases our delight is dependent on our perception of certain things following, necessarily or probably, from certain things laid down. I shall not pursue this point; but it is essential to remark that the cogency achieved in an excellent literary work is . . . a matter . . . of the sustained efficiency of what is done in the component parts of a novel, drama, or poem relative to the special quality of the imagined human activity that is being represented.

A LINGUIST:

> It is likely that most descriptions from now on will be formulated with no so-called double-base transformational rules but rather with an iterative constituent-structure-expansion-rule subcomponent of the syntax followed by a linear sequence of (largely obligatory) simplex transformational rules which map semantically interpretable underlying trees into phonetically interpretable output trees.

Prose of this opacity confronts the modern reader at every turn. We know today that a piece of prose is intended to catch our serious attention if, on the first reading, we do not understand what it means. Clearly, — or to be much more accurate, not at all clearly, — truth lurks behind these big words. As we "orientate ourselves to the basic factors of the current economic situation," if the "exigencies of our environment provide the motivation for the behavioural characteristics of contemporary society" — see how easy it is to write the stuff — we commit assault on our native tongue. And if we face the kids with this kind of language, we commit assault on them.

Why should the general run of scientist and every other kind of -ist today write so badly, and so badly in this particular manner? They did not always. The scientist, the philosopher, the literary critic, the political journalist three hundred years ago led the revolt against pomposity and inflation. Now they write the mandarin prose of the day. Turn to the political journalism of Swift, the philosophic argument of Hume or Bishop Berkeley, the literary criticism of Dryden, the scientific observation of Robert Boyle, and you will find a prose (a prose-prose) based on the vocabulary and movement of easy educated native speech, where — however complex the idea — the expression is clear. There is no linguistic barrier between writer and reader.

Consider the following two passages. They are both written by scientists of the first rank:

First passage:

> We shall mention some experiments that do in general show that the Expansion of freezing water is considerably strong.
>
> We took a new pewter-bottle, capable to contain, as we guessed, about half a pint of water, and having filled it top full with that liquor, we screwed on the stopple, and exposed it during a frosty night to the cold air, and the next morning the water appeared to have burst the bottle, though its matter was metalline; and though purposely for this trial we had chosen it quite new, the crack appeared

to be in the very substance of the pewter. This experiment we repeated.

We also tried, whether or no a much smaller quantity of water would not if frozen, have the like effect, and accordingly filling about an ounce of water a screwed pewter box (such as many use to keep their treacles and salves in) quite new and of a considerable thickness, we found that, upon the freezing of the included water, the vessel was very much burst.

Second passage:

As soon as some ancient member in the great series of the Primates came to be less arboreal, owing to a change in its manner of procuring subsistence, or to some change in the surrounding conditions, its habitual manner of progression would have been modified; and thus it would have been rendered more strictly quadrupedal or bipedal.

The first of these passages was written in 1665 by Robert Boyle. The second was written two hundred years later by Charles Darwin. Note I am being fair. I am comparing not a good scientist with a bad one, but two men of outstanding scientific originality. Why did the earlier scientist write so well, and the later scientist write so badly? I have already indicated the answer to the first of these questions: the scientists of the late seventeenth century found that current literary English was useless for their purposes. They had to re-constitute a speech-based prose of utility — and the men of letters of the eighteenth century quickly followed their lead. Darwin's inflated prose is modern mandarin. It is what our sociologists and other -ists still try to write.

Between the two, lies the shadow of Dr. Johnson, a man who created a magnificent latinized prose that admirably suited his temper. We enjoy, and indeed revere, Dr. Johnson. Were we content to admire and revere, I should not need to be giving this paper. The trouble is that the late eighteenth century, almost every serious-minded writer in the nineteenth, and many — far too many — writers in the twentieth century, have adopted the heavy latin style (what Sir Walter Scott called the "Big Bow-wow strain") as the only way to present a serious topic. Hence the opacity, the latinized vocabulary, the stiff impersonal tone, the long sentence, the passive constructions, of what I have called modern mandarin.

Its wide-spread adoption in the nineteenth century and its presistence to the present day is not simple to explain. One can see, of course, why the writers in the early nineteenth century reviews adopted the style. They were all in a sense minor Dr. Johnsons, pontificating every month of every quarter. But the style is everywhere, even in the penny press and in popular fiction. My own theory is that what established modern mandarin as the only serious style was the explosive growth of popular education. It may be a bit saddening to teachers to think that education has resulted in a bad prose, but I fear it is true. At the beginning of the nineteenth century England was only partly literate; by the twenties of the present century, England was entirely literate. The mass of newly literate wanted to read and write **educated** English. They knew that their own limited speech was no basis for written prose; they were out off from the level of society whose "easy" speech had produced an Addison and a Swift. What better proof, then, of being educated than to abandon your own limited, provincial, dialectal speech, and acquire the ability to read and write the long sentence and the inflated, latinized word? If you want further evidence for what education has done to English prose, examine any English gram-

mar written between the middle of the eighteenth century and the day before yesterday. From Blair's Rhetoric to Lindley Murray to Nesfield and beyond, there is an attack on the loose sentence, an enshrinement of the periodic, and an insistent vocabulary drill to ensure that the pupil knew — and used — bigger and bigger words. What English grammars have advocated for two hundred years has been this deviant and not the norm.

We, the teachers of English, have thus been in large measure responsible for giving status to modern mandarin. We have now the task of undoing our work, and getting English prose — and I mean here prose-prose — back to the main line. The most important task facing the teacher of English is the teaching of my first skill — ability to write English prose that can be understood. For this the teacher must know what the main line is and for the teacher at least this means starting a long way before 1920. As I said earlier modern prose cannot be taught as something that occurs in an isolated chunk of time. For one kind of prose — the prose of some of the great modern novelists — 1920 is the right beginning date. For prose-prose, 1920 is merely the end of a long decline. The real starting-date is 1660.

I do not offer you any advice on the choice of prose texts in the classroom. Granted that you know what you are up to, there is no modern prose that cannot be read with profit. But you have to know very clearly in your own mind what you are trying to do. You have to have convinced yourself of a satisfactory answer to my earlier question: What, after all, is English? And having answered that one, you then have to have a firm idea in your own mind of what are the criteria by which you determine whether prose is good prose. The test I offer is a simple one, at least in formulation. It is this: fitness for function. Prose to me is not good or bad because it is in short or long sentences, because it uses simple or complex words, because it is plain, or because it is purple. It is good when it does its job, communicating at the level the author intended the things that were in the author's mind. If you hold to this criterion, I think you will find you can use in the classroom a considerable range of prose texts, both to sharpen the children's critical sense and to encourage and shape their own writing.

One last word. The English teacher is teaching prose is not as such responsible for the literary artists of the next generation. They will almost certainly get their education in spite of you. What we are responsible for in teaching prose, is the young craftsman in words. To me the English classroom is (to use Newman's words on the University) a great but ordinary means to a great but ordinary end. If we can teach a sense of responsibility to language, a craftsman's pride in good usage and good construction, a contempt for sloppy imprecision and wavering syntax, we shall have done no disservice to the potential artist; and we shall have conferred an inestimable benefit on our particular corner of the English-speaking world.